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The New Science of Virtues

Abstract

Although Vico's New Science (NS) has been interpreted from the standpoint of practical philosophy, his treatment of moral virtues has largely been overlooked. I show the pivotal role they play in the NS, where the history of humankind is the story of how vices and virtues unfold, and the domain of free will is centred on the possibility of making virtues of the passions. This sheds new light on such notions as the "heterogony of ends", the relationship between "bestioni" and humankind, and the threat of the "barbarism of reflection". Also, it allows us to focus on fictional, mythological, and historical figures, which are exemplary for their virtues/vices and which provide an insight into the way virtues shape the stages of history. After presenting an overview of some of Vico's sources, I argue that he engages in a close dialogue with the Aristotelian tradition and interprets moral virtues as a historical framework and a hermeneutical tool suitable for assessing the moral stages of human historical evolution on the route to and from civilisation.

Keywords

Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, moral virtues, vices, passions, Aristotelian tradition, history, humankind

1. "Making virtues of passions"

In this paper,¹ I focus on Vico's account of the virtues in order to show that it is possible to consider the *New Science*² from the point of view of a theory of the virtues, that is, a genealogy of virtues and an account of evolutionary virtue ethics. When Vico presents the "Principal aspects of this science", in the beginning of the second book, among the different perspectives which, ac-

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2

In general, all quotations refer to *NS44* and, when they refer instead to *NS25*, this is clearly stated; in both cases passages are indicated by the number of paragraph. *NS44* is quoted in the Bergin-Fisch translation: G. Vico, *The New Science*, unabridged translation of the third edition (1744), with the addition of the "Practic of the New Science", transl. by T. G.

Bergin and M. H. Fisch, Cornell University Press, Ithaca – London 1984. Occasionally, to provide another translation of particularly thorny passages, the Marsh translation is used: G. Vico, *New Science*, third edition, transl. by D. Marsh, with an introduction by A. Grafton, Penguin, London 1999. *NS25* is quoted in the Pompa translation: G. Vico, *The First New Science*, ed. and transl. by L. Pompa, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002. *NS30* is referred to by page number from the Cristofolini edition: G. Vico, *La Scienza nuova 1730*, ed. P. Cristofolini, ass. ed. M. Sanna, Alfredo Guida, Napoli 2004. References to the Italian original terms used by Vico are provided from the Battistini edition: G. Vico, *Opere*, ed. A. Battistini, 2 vols., Mondadori, Milano 1990.

ording to him, can (and should) be applied to the interpretation of his work, he could well have added that the *NS* offers a historically developed interpretation of the Aristotelian theory of virtues. I do not necessarily mean that this is the way Vico wanted his text to be read, as the theory of virtue would have seemed very much a platitude to him. Instead, I wish to show that some of the conceptual, as well as lexical, choices made by Vico can be better understood if we bear in mind the widely debated tradition of moral virtues.

Dealing with the “second principal aspect of this science”, which is a “philosophy of authority”, he makes it clear that: “the property of human nature which not even God can take from man without destroying him (...) is the free use of the will” (§ 388–389). This is connected to Axiom VIII: that “man has free choice (*libero arbitrio*), however weak, to make virtues of his passions” (§ 136). How this historical transformation and civil evolution of the passions into virtues is achieved, and in what ways it brings about the whole course of history, is the object of the reading which I propose. From this standpoint, making the virtues the focus of our attention is relevant to developing a new insight into Vico’s work and to seeing how he deals with the long philosophical tradition of moral virtues and Aristotelian ethics. It might also help to counteract a widespread historiographical (mis)judgement typical of the analytical history of ethics: the view that philosophical reflection about virtues and virtue ethics moves from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to Hume, placing everything in between into a black hole of irrelevance.³

A preliminary objection needs to be confronted: is a “Vichian account of the virtues” to be found in the *NS* after all? Vico does not devote a specific section to a treatment of the virtues, and one would be hard put to track down a systematic approach to the virtues in his works. Instead, he provides multiple clues to different accounts of the virtues throughout his work and draws on complex, intertwined, and multi-faceted philosophical traditions which, however, seem to have generally escaped the attention of scholars. Although a good deal has been written about his treatment of prudence or of his heroes and their heroic virtue, no comprehensive analysis of moral virtues in the *NS* seems as yet to have been attempted. This is not the place to investigate any specific virtue at length; instead, I aim to focus on the way different philosophical traditions about moral virtues crop up in Vico’s work. A preliminary account of some of these various influences, based on a few passages in the *NS*, will guide us through Vico’s treatment of the notion of virtue. This notion should not only take into account references to the virtues and to their definitions, but should also strive for a broader outlook, in which their correlated vices are considered. There are many reasons for this: 1. Vico often juxtaposes virtues with vices and bases their theoretical polarity on historical considerations; 2. in doing so, he seems to be influenced, at least to some extent, by the Aristotelian tradition with regard to the definitions of virtues and vices; 3. however, the connection which Vico highlights between vice and virtue is not just an opposition or polarization in line with the Aristotelian tradition. He also connects virtues to vices; and in many instances their interconnections are spread along the continuous curve of ideal eternal history, as virtues and vices evolve and resolve into one another, with the heterogony of ends playing a key role in this passage.

2. At the root of virtues: Homer and Achilles

It comes as no surprise that in his research Vico does not start directly from the philosopher who we nowadays consider the father of virtue ethics, Aris-

tote. And this is not because he explicitly states in his *Autobiography* that he prefers Plato to Aristotle – a judgement which should be put under close scrutiny and called into question, or at least treated with some caution.⁴ Rather, in this instance, Aristotle’s moral philosophy cannot provide the point of departure for a theory of virtues because in Vico’s view he represents a mature stage of philosophical reflection, which he refers to as a stage of “fully developed human reason” (§ 326, 924). For the very same reason, Plato’s account of virtues also cannot help Vico, who is looking for the origins of human moral virtue. Therefore, moving along a regressive path in order to find the root of the virtues, Vico reaches an archaic poet, rather than a philosopher – Homer, rather than Plato.

A passage from *NS25* explains the reasons underlying this choice and its implications, both philological and philosophical: “whilst Plato was taking his notions from Homer, Homer has been read as if he had been a philosopher like Plato”.⁵ Vico openly criticises such an unhistorical interpretation of Homer’s poems; but his main reason for addressing this issue is to provide a comparison between the philosophers’ notion of heroic virtue and the poets’ notion of the hero and his virtue. This passage, with its *hapax legomenon* (*omerizzò*), lacks a correlative in the later versions of *NS*;⁶ Vico’s “Discovery of the true Homer” is yet to come, so this can only be seen as a hint at the philological issues which will find a more comprehensive solution there;⁷ and yet this passage shows the distance, as well as the connection, between the hero of the poets and the hero of the philosophers.

The difference between them is the notion of virtue which they embodied. The poets attributed virtue to the supposedly divine nature of the hero, a concept which was later reinforced by metaphysics:

“the hero of the poets was believed to be of divine origin because he had been born under Jupiter’s spells, and this is how the poets’ hero, by meditation and philosophical explanation became the philosophers’ hero: that he was the one who, by meditating on the eternal truths taught by metaphysics, he actually could become of a divine nature, and because of that, he naturally acted moved by virtues” (*NS25*, § 301).

It seems here that, properly speaking, moral virtues are only to be found at a later stage in history, as well as in history of philosophy; and yet the Ho-

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See, for instance, S. M. Gardiner ed., *Virtue Ethics, Old and New*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca – London 2005, p. 1.

4

There is little doubt, for instance, that Vico’s division of moral, economic and civil virtues is modelled on the Renaissance Aristotelian tradition of moral philosophy, which distinguished between ethics, oeconomics and politics, see J. Krayer, “Moral philosophy”, in: gen. ed. C. B. Schmitt, eds. Q. Skinner, E. Kessler, ass. ed. J. Krayer, *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 303–386, in particular at pp. 303–305. Generally speaking, and from a quantitative perspective, compared to *NS25*, *NS44* contains a larger number of references to both Plato and Aristotle, but while the number of references to Plato in-

creases only moderately, there are more than five times as many to Aristotle.

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NS25, § 302 (“onde Platone omerizzò, Omero fu creduto platonizzare”).

6

For a synoptic analysis of the different versions of *NS* book III about Homer in the 1730 and in the 1744 edition see, G. Vico, *La scoperta del vero Omero*, seguita dal *Giudizio sopra Dante*, ed. P. Cristofolini, ETS, Pisa 2006.

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The criticism aimed at the notion of Homer as a philosopher anticipates the Vichian solution of the Homeric question, see P. Cristofolini, “Prefazione”, in G. Vico, *La scoperta del vero Omero*, pp. 5–19.

meric legacy⁸ is the point of departure, since Plato drew his notions from Homer, and Vico was looking for the nature of things by tracing them back to their origins.⁹ This explains why he investigates what sort of virtue can be attributed to the hero of the poets, as that must be the source of a primeval, fundamental virtue. This *Ur-Tugend*, first appearing as a trait belonging to the heroes in Homer's *Iliad*, was the basic (and even base) element of an as yet unrecognized, and barely recognizable, moral life.

That the Homeric poems provide the first account of ethics and can be considered the original source of the customs and virtues which have shaped the Western tradition was obvious to Vico; and, remarkably, “recent decades have seen a great deal of fascinating and suggestive scholarly work on the ethics of the Homeric poems”.¹⁰ Although the educational value of Homer's poems was widely recognized by ancient authors,¹¹ nowadays this view is less common; and in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, which opens with an introductory chapter devoted to “Homeric Ethics”, Roger Crisp feels the need to justify this subject.¹² Crisp does not refer to Vico, who, nevertheless, seems to strike a balance between a developmental, progressivist view, as put forward by Bruno Snell, which considers the Homeric poems as portraying a ‘primitive’ account of morality, and a regressivist account, as developed by Bernard Williams. The latter perspective will become clear in § 7 below, while here I will consider the former.

When considering Vico's progressive view in relation to the moral virtues, we are bound to notice that in providing his account of a genealogy of virtues, Vico first of all goes back to Homer's poems; and what he finds there is indeed so far from the philosophical and ethical notion of virtue that it supports his belief that it is a trustworthy and truthful exposition of the typical characteristics of the heroic nature. These are described as “crude, course, wild, savage, volatile, unreasonable or unreasonably obstinate, frivolous, and foolish”.¹³ Previously he had remarked that the *Iliad* is filled with “bloody battles, so many and such extravagantly cruel kinds of butchery”, and that most comparisons are drawn “from beasts and other savage things” and coupled with a “truculent and savage style” (§ 785). The “blind rage (*cieca collera*)”, the “bestial wrath (*collera bestiale*)” and the “gods and heroes of such instability” (§ 786) far exceed (or rather: precede) any trace of humanity and civility, so that the wisdom of philosophers could not have imagined them. If we consider the Aristotelian account of virtues and vices in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it appears that in Homer we are confronted with something which more closely resembles a list of vices than a catalogue of virtues: irascibility, rashness, meanness, rusticity, conceit, and vulgarity, as opposed to good temper, self-restraint, truthfulness, urbanity, liberality, and greatness of soul.

Aristotle had written that “the conceited sort (...) are foolish, and ignorant of themselves”,¹⁴ and Vico expands this notion: they are foolish because they came early in historical development and therefore their immaturity resembles that of small children (a concept made sufficiently clear by Francis Bacon¹⁵). In a way, it looks like the transformation of passions and vices into virtues might just be a matter of *opus temporis*. And if we compare Vico's long lists of the vices of the first men with the theory of virtues and vices in Aristotelian ethics, many correspondences become evident, making the *Iliad* look like a complete catalogue of moral vices: haughtiness, presumption, hostility, pettiness, naivety, insensitivity, hardness of heart are all to be found there. Achilles is the archetypal example of the traits of the Homeric hero, and Vico presents him as

“... forgetting the sacred laws of hospitality, unmindful of the simple faith in which Priam has come all alone to him (...) unmoved by the many great misfortunes of such a king or by pity for such a father or by the veneration due to so old a man, heedless of the common lot (*fortuna comune*) which avails more than anything else to arouse compassion”.¹⁶

So what sort of virtue does Achilles possess? It seems legitimate to doubt that it can be regarded as a virtue at all, Vico argues.

And yet, he provides an interpretation of Achilles’ qualities which relies heavily on the epithet “blameless”: “This is the hero that Homer sings of to the Greek peoples as an example of heroic virtue and to whom he gives the fixed epithet ‘blameless’ (*irreprensibile*)!”.¹⁷ This epithet (*amumon*) deserves closer attention: Nicolini¹⁸ remarks that Vico here is transferring to the moral

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See K. Mueller-Vollmer, “Vom wahren Homer und vom historischen Abstand. Gedanken zu Vicos wilder Hermeneutik”, in: K. K. Polheim ed., *Sinn und Symbol*, Peter Lang, Bern 1987, pp. 45–64; A. Grafton, “Introduction”, in: G. Vico, *New Science*, pp. XI–XXXIII; L. Ferreri, *La questione omerica dal Cinquecento al Settecento*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome 2007.

9

See the famous Axiom XIV: “The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being (*nascimento*) at certain times and in certain guises” (*NS44*, § 147); “The nature of an institution is identical with its *nascence* at a certain time and in a certain manner” (trans. Marsh).

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R. Crisp, “Homeric Ethics”, in R. Crisp ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 1–20, here p. 17. See also D. Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993; T. H. Irwin, *Classical Thought*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989; A. A. Long, “Morals and Values in Homer”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90 (1970), pp. 121–139; A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, Macmillan, New York 1966; R. Sharples, “But Why Has My Spirit Spoken with Me Thus?: Homeric Decision-Making”, *Greece and Rome* 30 (1983), pp. 1–7; B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008² (1993); N. Yamagata, *Homeric Morality*, Brill, Leiden 1994.

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R. Crisp, “Homeric Ethics”, “the poems were an educational staple” (p. 1); see, for instance, Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander*, 8.

12

R. Crisp, “Homeric Ethics”, pp. 1–2: “The other chapters in this *Handbook* mostly concern philosophers, their views, and their works. So why begin with a chapter on a couple of poems? One reason is the central

importance of the poems in the history of philosophy, and hence of philosophical ethics”. Among the other reasons given here, the problems of interpretation and translation play a central role. They raise “issues about the nature of morality itself, the human self and agency, responsibility, shame and other moral emotions, and the nature of the virtue in general, and of particular virtues such as courage and compassion” (p. 2). Crisp urges that “it is vital, then, in seeking to answer the questions raised in philosophical ethics not to restrict one’s reading to works traditionally categorized as ‘philosophical’ (...) there is in Homer a view of the nature of human beings and their place in the world, and their reasons for living and acting in that world” (*ibid.*).

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NS44, § 787 (“rozzi, villani, feroci, fieri, mobili, irragionevoli o irragionevolmente ostinati, leggieri e schiocchi”).

14

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1125a27.

15

See, for instance, F. Bacon, *Cogitata et visa*, 13.

16

§ 786. See Cicero, *Pro Quinctio*, 97 for a passage dealing with compassion (*miser cordia*) and bearing a close affinity to this passage of Vico, both in content and in structure.

17

§ 667 (“Omero con l’aggiunto perpetuo d’*irreprensibile* canta a’ greci popoli in esempio d’eroica virtù”). Both Bergin-Fisch and Marsh translate “blameless”; Pompa recurs to “irreproachable” (*NS25*, § 52), however “blameless” has been for a long time the customary translation in the *Iliad*.

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F. Nicolini, *Commento storico alla seconda scienza nuova*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1949–1950, II vol., p. 296: the epithet “hints only at the position held by birth, at physical beauty and heroic courage, not at moral qualities, as Vico seems to believe”.

field features originally intended by Homer to indicate such exterior aspects as “being properly clad”. Vico himself comes up with his own explanation as to what the epithet means. Before discussing this, however, it is worth noting that his translation of the epithet as *irreprensibile* helps us to identify the version of Homer’s *Iliad* which Vico was reading.¹⁹ A survey of the translations available in Naples during his lifetime, limited to the Biblioteca Brancacciana’s holdings as recorded in the catalogue printed in 1750,²⁰ shows that the edition of the *Iliad* to which Vico referred was almost certainly the annotated edition²¹ by Hubert van Giffen, printed in Strasbourg in 1572, containing the Greek text (1566) by Henri Estienne and the Latin translation (1559) by Jean Crespin. This appears to be the only one to use, twice, *irreprehensibilis* as the epithet for Achilles.²² This hypothesis will need further investigation, of course, as Vico no doubt consulted more than one *Iliad* translation; however, this edition looks like the version he might have used for reference.²³

The attempt to solve the riddle of why Achilles is described as “blameless” has a long history, with many scholars offering tentative explanations,²⁴ ranging from the ornamental to the formulaic (and therefore unrelated to the context) to the irrational²⁵ use of epithets by Homer. In a book entirely devoted to investigating this specific epithet, Anne Amory Parry analysed its 116 occurrences in both Homeric poems, considering their context as well as whom they designated. While she concludes that translating it as “blameless” does not make sense in any of these occurrences, she nevertheless demonstrates that the epithet

“... denotes primarily the kind of beauty possessed by a young, strong, and active man, it might by an easy extension come to mean ‘like a warrior’ in respect to any quality which was allied with or dependent on a strong, handsome body. *Amumon* therefore may possess the connotations of ‘brave’, ‘spirited’, ‘steadfast in battle’ and so on (...) if English had an adjective that meant ‘possessing the strong, handsome body of a warrior’ that adjective could be used satisfactorily in the majority of the passages”.²⁶

Unsurprisingly, Vico’s explanation of this epithet differs from Amory’s; but both share a similar sense of the inappropriateness of the translation ‘blameless’, as well as an awareness that the interpretation of this epithet is the key to bridging the gap between Homer’s archaic culture and our own civilization.

The difficulty of making sense of this epithet and of its translation had been apparent to Vico since *NS25* (§ 52), where he did not provide a convincing explanation. Achilles’ exemplary role in the *Iliad* as a hero endowed with heroic virtue puzzled Vico, since he could not help noticing that Achilles connected his notion of what was right to his own strength and failed to recognize any divine authority or superiority in Apollo, just as any Polyphemus would do, except that no one would consider him a model of heroic virtue. In *NS30* Vico’s ironical attitude is signalled by his use of an exclamation mark;²⁷ and Cristofolini’s edition shows in its critical apparatus the wealth of annotation and marginalia crowding around this passage²⁸ between 1730 and 1744. Only in *NS44* did Vico produce his own explanation in a newly written passage interpolated in the previous text of *NS30*. Here Vico assumes that “blameless” (*irreprensibile*) serves the purpose of indicating that Achilles was a proud man:

“This epithet (...) can be understood only as meaning a man so arrogant (*un uomo orgoglioso*) that, as we would say nowadays, he will not let a fly pass the end of his nose. What he <Homer> preaches is thus the virtue of punctiliousness, on which the duelists of the returned barbarian times based their entire morality, and which gave rise to the proud laws (*leggi superbe*), the lofty duties (*ufizj altieri*) and the vindictive satisfactions of the knight errant of whom the romancers sing”.²⁹

While Bergin and Fisch translate *orgoglioso* as “arrogant”, the Italian has the less obviously negative connotation of “proud”; and the twin notions of *orgoglio* and *superbia* prove fundamental in Vico’s attempt to uncover the root of heroic virtue.

This original, not yet moral virtue of pride – almost instead a vice – is often paired with another: fierceness (*fierezza*).³⁰ For Vico this word implies cruelty and violence; and it seems likely that he chose *fierezza* because its root highlights a link to *fiera* and therefore to the primeval *bestioni* who cannot control their rage. This is not a virtue as Aristotle would have imagined it; and, yet,

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This problem has also been addressed by Andrea Battistini in his commentary, where he goes as far as excluding that Vico might have had A. M. Salvini’s translation (1723) in mind.

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See *Bibliothecae S. Angeli ad Nidum ab inclyta Brancatorum familia constructae, et ab aliis deinceps auctae catalogus. In quo singuli singularium Artium, et Scientiarum Libri, qui in quavis fere lingua exstant, Auctorumque cognomina ordine alphabetico recensentur*, Abbatem & Raymundum, Naples 1750, pp. 154–155. One of the main tools for making a more thorough survey was not available to me: consultation of Valletta’s library catalogue is currently suspended. For a general overview of the problems, as well as tools needed to assess Vico’s ‘library’, see R. Bassi, “Introduzione”, in: eadem, *Canoni di mitologia: materiali per lo studio delle fonti vichiane*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome 2005, pp. 11–26. For an annotated catalogue of the editions and translations of the Homeric poems up to Vico’s time, see M. Cesarotti, “Catalogo delle principali edizioni e versioni di Omero”, in: idem, *Versione letterale dell’Iliade*, Molini e Landi, Florence 1809, pp. 1–33.

21

Homer, *Ilias seu potius omnia eius quae extant opera, studio et cura Ob. Giphanii I. C. quam emendatissime edita, cum ejusdem Scholij et Indicibus novis, excudebat T. Riheilius*, Argentorati [1572]. This octavo edition, although judged to be inaccurate both in text and in translation by Isaac Casaubon, was widespread throughout Europe and was considered exemplary for a long time. It was also present in Spinoza’s library: the only work by Homer which he possessed; see *Catalogus van de Bóekerij*, Vereeniging “Het Spinozahuis”, Den Haag [1914], n. 117 [38], p. 28.

22

See Homer, *Ilias*, [1572], 2, 674, 770 (pp. 93, 97). In all other occurrences, however, a different choice of translations is presented (*eximius*, *egregius*, *inculpatus*). Other editions, for instance Homer’s *Iliad* edited by Joshua Barnes in Cambridge (1711), tend to translate

the epithet consistently as *laudatissimus* and *eximius*. See also H. Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, Paris 1831–1856, vol. 1 pars altera, *ad vocem*, pp. 174–175.

23

From *NS25* (§ 52), through *NS30* (p. 253) and to *NS44* (§ 667).

24

Vico quotes (and mocks) J. C. Scaliger’s endeavour to rectify this problem in his *Poetics*, see A. Grafton, “Introduction”, in: G. Vico, *New Science*, pp. XI–XXXIII, in particular about Vico’s interpretation of Homer and the role of J. C. Scaliger see pp. XX–XXIV.

25

See S. Lowenstam, “Iris ‘Queenly’ Mother and the Problem of the Irrational Use of Homeric Epithets”, *Pacific Coast Philology* (1981), pp. 39–47.

26

A. Amory Parry, *Blameless Aegisthus. A Study of Amumon and other Homeric epithets*, Brill, Leiden 1973, p. 60, see also p. 157.

27

NS30, p. 253: “Ecco l’Eroe, ch’Omero canta a’ Greci popoli in esempio dell’Eroica Virtù!”.

28

See also the facsimile edition with Vico’s ms. notes: G. Vico, *Principi d’una scienza nuova d’intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni*, ed. by F. Lomonaco e F. Tessitore, with a foreword by M. Sanna, Liguori, Napoli 2002, p. 313.

29

§ 667, the Bergin-Fisch translation shifts, while keeping, Vico’s emphasis on the notion of pride, which proves pivotal, while this notion is obliterated in Marsh translation: “a man so arrogant (...) the haughty laws, pompous ceremonies”.

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See § 1097 (“tutti stupore, quanto erano tutti orgoglio, e fierezza”, and also: “i primi selvaggi orgogliosi, fierissimi”, “posta la loro orgogliosa e violenta natura”).

how far can this pride and fierceness go towards developing virtues like Aristotelian magnanimity, courage and righteous indignation? Vico searches for passions/vices which flow into virtues, so when looking into Homer's *Iliad* for Achilles' characteristics and heroic virtue, he tries to trace the not yet moral root of the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity by following the *fil rouge* of the passion of anger.³¹

3. The four cardinal virtues in Hercules: the Platonic-Christian tradition

The account of virtues (or, more appropriately, vices) based on the Homeric poems and the figure of Achilles is very far from accounts of the first virtues presented in other passages of the *NS*, centered as these are on the figure of Hercules. This demigod highlights a different set of virtues, belonging to a different stage of history, possibly one preceding the stage we have just considered, although admittedly their relationship is not always clear:

“the fathers of the first gentes were the first *strong* men of history. Hence the founders of the first gentile nations above mentioned were the Herculeses (...) thus the first fathers of the gentile nations – who were (1) *just* in virtue of the supposed *piety* of observing the auspices which they believed divine commands of Jove (from whose Latin name *Ious* came (...) so that justice among all peoples is naturally thought along with piety); (2) *prudent* in sacrificing to obtain or clearly to understand the auspices, and thus to take good counsel of what, by the commands of Jove, they should undertake in life; and (3) *temperate* in the institution of matrimony – were also, as is here indicated, (4) *strong* men. Hence new principles are given to moral philosophy (...) by these principles all the virtues have their roots in piety and religion, by which alone the virtues are made effective in action, and by reason of which men propose to themselves as good whatever God wills.” (§ 14)

This long, rambling passage needs to be stripped of its many subordinate clauses, so that we can appreciate that Vico here isolates a set of virtues and ties them strongly to religion. It is easy to see in this instance the influence of the four cardinal virtues of the Christian tradition (fortitude, justice, prudence and temperance), which, though mediated by the Stoic tradition, originated in Plato's *Republic* (427e–434a; 441c–444a), where the virtues of the *polis* are discussed.

Placed at the very beginning of *NS44* in the opening section entitled “Idea of the work”, this passage is the first account of the virtues the reader comes across, and it sounds like an explicit declaration of faith and Christian orthodoxy³². This is one of the very few passages where the Platonic tradition is presented in a pure form. More often, spurious elements are intermixed, as we see in another highly relevant section, the “conclusion of the work”:

“They developed commonwealths on the basis of orders naturally superior by reason of virtues certainly heroic. First, *piety*, for they adored divinity, (...) and in virtue of their piety they were also endowed with *prudence*, taking counsel from the auspices of the gods; with *temperance*, each coupling chastely with the one woman whom he had taken under the divine auspices as perpetual companion for life; with *strength* for slaying beasts and taming the earth; and with *magnanimity* in giving succour to the weak and aid to those in danger. Such was the nature of the Herculean commonwealths, in which the *pious*, *wise*, *chaste*, *strong*, and *magnanimous* cast down the proud and defended the weak, which is the mark of excellence in civil governments”.³³

Here the Aristotelian virtue of magnanimity is inserted into the four pillars of the Platonic system of virtues; and justice, if it is to be found, comes under the category of magnanimity, which is defined as “casting down the proud and defending the weak”.

Just a few lines above, describing a previous stage of community life, Vico adopts an even simpler tripartite division of virtue into piety, temperance and fortitude: “these fathers, in the state we must call of nature (which was identical with the state of the families), must have formed the first natural orders, as being those who were *pious, chaste and strong*.” (§ 1098). These virtues are conducive to civil institutions: marriage (temperance); private property and control of the boundaries of cultivated areas (fortitude: “in order to defend themselves and their families they had to kill the wild beasts that attacked them”); and the particular form of piety which suspends nomadic life, so that “in order to provide sustenance for themselves and their families (...) they had to tame the earth and sow grain”. Similarly, at §§11–13, Vico had referred to marriages, burials (linked to control of the boundaries of cultivated areas) and altars as ostensible signs of virtues such as temperance, piety and justice.

4. Aristotle and magnanimity

In Axiom LXVIII the course of ideal eternal history is reworked by means of a personification of the virtues:

“In the human race first appear the huge and grotesque (*immani e goffi*), like the cyclopes (*Polifemi*); then the proud and magnanimous, like Achilles; then the valorous and just, like Aristides and Scipio Africanus; nearer to us, imposing figures with great semblances of virtues accompanied by great vices (*appariscenti con grand'immagini di virtù che s'accompagnano con grandi vizi*), who among the vulgar win a name for true glory, like Alexander and Caesar; still later, the melancholy and reflective (*tristi riflessivi*), like Tiberius; finally the dissolute and shameless madmen (*furiosi dissoluti e sfacciati*), like Caligula, Nero and Domitian.” (§ 243).

Here, Vico adopts the rhetorical devices of climax, anticlimax, and antonomasia in order to express his own anthropological view, rooted in the Aristotelian theory of virtue. He reworks it so as to deduce both a series of historical steps in the evolution of morality and a moral lexicon which he obviously finds valuable. The adjectives used by Vico in this passage (*immani, magnanimi, valorosi, giusti, furiosi, dissoluti, sfacciati*) are revealing of the correlate virtues and come loaded with a moral reflexion that had been working on them for centuries, at the time Vico was writing. Such lists of adjectives,³⁴ which are found in many passages of the *NS*, are only apparently repetitive, and should be carefully considered as they serve the purpose of building up a theory of the evolution of virtues (and vices) throughout the course of history.

In Vico's work, the Aristotle of the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* has the same authority as Aristotle of the ethical works (and at times, apparently, even more). An instance of this is evident when we consider Vico's reference to great leaders of the past such as Alexander the Great and Caesar. Aristotle in the

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See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II. 2.

32
For an account of how pagan virtues had been harmonized with Christian ideals during the Renaissance period, see J. Krayer, “Pagan Virtue in Pursuit of Christian Happiness: Renaissance Humanists and the Revival of Classical Ethics”, in: G. Althoff ed., *Zeichen – Rituale – Werte. Internationales Kolloquium des Sonderforschungsbereichs 496 an der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster*, Rhema, Münster 2004, pp. 55–68.

33
NS44, § 1099. See also § 516 and 553.

34
See also § 708 (where the heroic customs are qualified as “boorish, crude, harsh, wild, proud, difficult, obstinate; bluff, touchy, magnanimous and generous”) and § 1101 (“gl'industriosi non gl'inguardi, i parchi non gli pròdigi, i providi non gli scioperati, i magnanimi non gli gretti di cuore”).

Poetics (13, 1453a–1454b) conceded that such figures are excellent characters for tragedies, where it is necessary to employ heroes “that are neither very good nor very bad, but mixing great vices and great virtues” (§ 708). However, as I have tried to show, Vico does not rely exclusively on the Aristotelian tradition, because all the while he keeps the Platonic legacy in the background, with reference to the four cardinal virtues, later systematized by St Ambrose. Although the intertwined traditions of Platonism and Aristotelianism might seem to form an inextricably tangled skein in Vico’s work, one way of evaluating their respective influence more carefully would be to take into consideration the fact that only the Aristotelian theory can account for a notion of virtue which is socially conditioned and susceptible to historical variation. Aristotelian virtues are the outcome of an ever-changing balance (*mesotes*) between two extremes, and this balance can only be identified on the basis of variable circumstances. Even so, Vico does not seem to adhere strictly to the Aristotelian theory of the virtues, but rather draws on the reinterpretations and debates which had grown up around it, in the form of a wealth of treatises and compendia, each with its own outlook on the virtues. The particular Aristotelian tradition of the virtues which might be at work in the *NS* can therefore be investigated by focusing specifically on the Neapolitan context and more generally on the Italian one, along lines which still need to be more thoroughly examined.³⁵ I will deal here with just a few sketchy examples, in order to show the multi-faceted nature of this tradition, as well as the ways it could have been directly accessed by Vico.

5. Pontano: *immanitas* as vice (vs. *humanitas* as virtue)

At the end of the 15th century, as well as a treatise on the virtue of magnanimity (*De magnanimitate*), Giovanni Pontano wrote a work entitled *De immanitate*.³⁶ The term *immanitas* indicated the attitude of someone who either denies the existence of God or celebrates the divinity by ceremonies and sacrifices which lack any trace of humanity.³⁷ Pontano’s interest in this notion is not particularly original, since most commentaries on the Aristotelian ethics in that period, and even much later,³⁸ included a section devoted to it. This philosophical reflexion on *immanitas* must have been known to Vico, who employs this concept in an extremely precise sense and in a carefully chosen context; and his use is consistent with Pontano’s definition. Interestingly, that definition is two-fold, a duality which will be given new meaning by Vico’s reinterpretation, as we shall see.

The notion of *immanitas* is at the root of the image of the “bestly man”.³⁹ Therefore, although it implies “inhuman” in the sense of cruel and can even mean “inhumane”, a very specific connotation links this notion to a lack of religion or to inappropriate religious ritual. Inspired by a hint in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VII, 6, 1148 b 20), where it is opposed to the heroic virtue, commentators had developed its scope and implications, using *immanitas* to show that, by contrast, *humanitas* was a virtue, rather than a state which could be taken for granted. Keeping in mind Pontano’s treatise, therefore, it becomes very easy to see why Vico identifies humanity with piety. Humanity is first of all a virtue and had already been considered as such by Cicero and in the classical tradition. As a virtue, it could be interpreted in an Aristotelian framework as a disposition requiring cultivation and constant exercise in what would become a “Practic” of humanity, based on the recognition of the divinity and demonstrated by appropriate cults of veneration. Vico, however, can detect a continuity and a gradual progression, which, while distinguishing *humanitas* as virtue from *immanitas* as vice, nevertheless links them together in that one is the root

and occasion for the emergence of the other. There is no mutual exclusion; they both stand in a kind of tension, which constantly underlies the practice of humanity, understood as a virtue. But this potential, on-going threat affects humanity, understood as a condition of being (opposed to that of beasts), and makes the state of humankind dependent on the virtue of humanity.

Just as the first religious sentiment is born out of veneration for false gods, whose cult is a form of superstition, so, too, the first virtues arise from a modification of original vices. This is where the “heterogony of ends” comes in; but Vico would not say that virtues stem directly from vices. Instead, those high-powered, original vices, destined to determine the entire course of history, are called from the very beginning “virtues of the senses” (*virtù per sensi*), that is, they are not and cannot be the result of reason, reflection and philosophy: “in conclusion, the virtues of that first time were like those (...) admired by the Scythians, who would fix a knife in the ground and adore it as a god, and thus justify their killings; that is, they were virtues of the senses, with an admixture of religion and cruelty (*mescolate di religione ed immanità*)” (§ 516). The tension between *bestioni* and humankind, which is at the basis of *NS*, is shaped inside a framework which owes much to the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics: when humankind is conceived in terms of an Aristotelian exercise of virtue, centered on a golden mean, it follows that it must guard itself on two fronts: *immanitas* as superstition, like that of the Scythians, on the one hand, and *immanitas* as atheism, like that of Polybius and Bayle, on the other. The double meaning in Pontano’s definition is able to accommodate both these polemical targets of Vico.

6. Tesaurò

The expression “genealogy of virtues”, used throughout this paper, is not employed by Vico, although it might well have been. It appears in Emanuele Tesaurò (1592–1675) as the title of a section of his work, *La filosofia morale derivata dall’alto fonte del grande Aristotele Stagirita*. This treatise, reprinted in Venice in 1703, in 1712 and again in 1729, was first published in 1670, and its reprints testify to the great interest in it during the first half of the 18th century. It is a weighty 700-page tome, generally regarded as an unoriginal compendium, which has not received much attention from scholars compared to other works by Tesaurò such as his *Cannocchiale aristotelico*. In the field of rhetoric, Vico has been read in light of Tesaurò’s *Cannocchiale aristotelico*, and it seems unlikely that he would have neglected a commentary on Aristotle’s moral philosophy by the same author, especially given its popularity in his own days.

In Tesaurò’s work, there emerges an awareness that virtues translate into civil, social, and political institutions, which seems to imply a historical reading of moral virtues. In Axiom VII, Vico combines this notion with that of the

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Several years ago this was advocated by E. Nuzzo, *Tra religione e prudenza: la “filosofia pratica” di Giambattista Vico*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Rome 2007, p. 54, n. 24.

36

I. I. Pontani, *De Immanitate liber*, ed. by L. Monti Sabia, Loffredo, Naples 1970.

37

Ivi, III, pp. 9–10.

38

See, for instance, M. S. Evenius, *Doctrina de moribus universa*, Wittemberg 1612, *Disputatio XVI, De virtute heroica*, Theorema V “*Extremum Heroicae Virtutis est Feritas seu Immanitas quovis vitio deterior*”.

39

See C. Finzi, “Giovanni Pontano, politica e cultura in Napoli aragonese”, *Anales de la Fundación Francisco Elías de Tejada* (1998), pp. 161–188, where he refers to *uomo imbestiato*.

heterogony of ends, drawing a picture of vices and virtues as interconnected: “Legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society. Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race, it creates the military (*la milizia*), merchant (*la mercatanzia*), and governing classes (*la corte*), and thus the strength (*la fortezza*), riches (*l’opulenza*), and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness” (§ 132). Tesauro had addressed the virtue at the root of the institution of *mercatanzia* in his commentary.⁴⁰ Vico, however, goes beyond that and treats it as an instance where the heterogony of ends helps to explain how vices and passions can be turned into virtues:

“This axiom proves that there is divine providence and further that it is a divine legislative mind. For out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage, for the sake of which they would live like wild beasts in the wilderness, it has made the civil institutions by which they may live in human society” (§ 133).

Many more parallels between Vico and Tesauro can be identified and merit closer analysis: not only the standard reference to the heroic virtue⁴¹ (and its correlate *bestialità*), but also the discussion of the massiveness of pyramids, considered as a trait typical of barbarism and the opposite of magnificence.⁴² Vico develops this hint as an instance of *boria dei dotti*⁴³ and uses it to dismiss Atanasius Kircher, who had exalted Egyptian culture as an example of the wisdom of the ancients.

7. Conclusion

Some important references which might help us to gain a better understanding of this problem have been left out of this preliminary investigation: Paolo Mattia Doria’s notion of civil-life virtues, Mandeville’s convergence of vices into virtues, Bayle’s notion of virtuous atheism, the Renaissance legacy of pairing virtue and *fortuna*, the hints in Francis Bacon and Spinoza at a “semblance of virtue”, which has a close affinity to Vico’s own notion. For this reason, these can only be partial conclusions. The Aristotelian framework, correlating every virtue with a defect and an excess, both understood as vices, seems to shape important elements in the *NS*. Even the work’s conclusion, presenting a sketch of the barbarism of reflection, seems to bear traces of this structure:

“For such peoples, like so many beasts, (...) lived like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will (...) through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits (*ingegni maliziosi*) that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman (*fiere più immani*) by the barbarism of reflection that the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense. For the latter display a generous savagery (*fierezza generosa*) (...) but the former, with a base savagery (*fierezza vile*), under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates” (§ 1106).

A detailed list of the vices which condemn peoples to the courses and recourses of history introduced this passage, and one might wonder how, and whether, these vices would differ from those typical of the first age, as here, too, people are “slaves of their unrestrained passions” (§ 1105). Such passions, however, are described as those of “luxury, effeminacy, avarice, envy, pride and vanity”; and although it is specified that “in pursuit of the pleasures of their dissolute life <they> were falling back into all the vices characteristic of the most abject slaves”, these vices differ from those of the first age because they are based on duplicity and falsehood, causing humans to “become liars, tricksters, calumniators, thieves, cowards and pretenders” (§ 1105). Duplicity appears to mark the excesses of “vices of reason” (Vico might have

remembered Aristotle's notion of irony as a vice), as opposed to the "vices of senses", which are, in Vico's eyes, *virtù per sensi*, that is, expressing truths, even when rooted in false beliefs.

While early humanity tends to be moved by vices rooted in an excess of passions (*fierezza generosa*), and the descent into barbarism brings about behaviours based on vices which have traits in common with the first age of barbarism (such as *immanitas/fierezza*), in the later stage of declining humanity, the general inclination tends to be towards defective vices (*fierezza vile*) and a lack of passions, coupled with an excess of calculating dissimulation. The anthropological scheme which places the age of reason after the age of sense is made more complex, and not always entirely consistent, because it intersects with the Aristotelian framework which maintains that the virtue of humanity is the mean between two different sorts of vice, both limiting and counteracting humanity, either by an excess of passions and sense (and, what amounts to the same thing, by defective reasoning), or by an excess of reflection (and defective common sense). The universal character of Tiberius, described as "melancholy reflective" (though Vico more appropriately refers instead to sadness, *tristezza*), stands at a turning point where reflection in excess starts to become a tainted, vicious practice, at first just subtly and inadvertently. We would search the *NS* in vain for the happiness which motivates Aristotelian ethics; instead we find this hint at sadness which signals a precocious isolation, a self-seclusion and a mind closed to the disposition of humanity, understood as the virtue of partaking in the common nature of nations. Upon the Aristotelian structure of vices as an excess, on the one hand, and a defect, on the other, with virtues grounded in a golden mean, Vico can unfold the three movements of ideal eternal history. Although he is familiar with the invocation to tread the *via media*,⁴⁴ advanced by one of his "four authors", after having written and subsequently discarded his *Practic of New Science*, it looks like he can no longer harbour the belief that such a virtuous route is actually able to provide a sheltered dimension for humankind to live in.

Romana Bassi

Nova znanost vrlinâ

Sažetak

Iako je Vicova Nova znanost (NZ) bila interpretirana sa stajališta praktičke filozofije, njegovo razmatranje moralnih vrlina većinom je bilo zanemareno. U radu ću ukazati na ključnu ulogu koju vrline imaju u NZ, gdje je povijest čovječanstva prikazana kao priča o tome kako se razvijaju mane i vrline, a domena slobodne volje je usmjerena na mogućnost stvaranja vrlina strasti. Ovo baca novo svjetlo na pojmove poput »heterogonije svrha«, veze između »bestionija« i čo-

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E. Tesauro, *La filosofia morale derivata dall'alto fonte del grande Aristotele Stagirita*, Pezzana, Venice 1729, p. 163.

41

Ibid., pp. 579–586.

42

Ibid., p. 184: "Magnifica fu veramente la *mole di Artemisia* ... ma se si considera il fine ... quella certamente non fu vera magnificenza, ma insana oltradecenza; che diede l'esempio, e il nome ad altre simili insanie. L'istesso

dirai delle *barbare piramidi* dell'Egitto ... e principalmente di quella del Re Cleope, più smisurata di tutte, e più vergognosa."

43

See G. Cacciatore, "Le 'borie' di Vico tra etica e filosofia della storia", *Rivista di filosofia* (2011), pp. 363–380.

44

See F. Bacon, *De sapientia veterum*, XXVII: "Scylla, et Icarus, sive Via Media".

vječanstva, te prijetnje »barbarizma refleksije«. To nam također omogućuje da se fokusiramo na fiktivne, mitološke i povijesne ličnosti, koje su primjer njihovih vrлина/mane i koje nude uvid u način na koji vrline oblikuju stadije povijesti. Nakon prikaza nekih Vicovih izvora, nastojat ću pokazati da Vico vodi blizak dijalog s aristotelovskom tradicijom te interpretira moralne vrline kao historijski okvir i hermeneutičko oruđe prikladno za procjenu moralnih stadija ljudske povijesne evolucije na putu prema i od civilizacije.

Ključne riječi

Giambattista Vico, *Nova znanost*, moralne vrline, mane, strasti, aristotelovska tradicija, povijest, čovječanstvo

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Neue Wissenschaft der Tugenden

Zusammenfassung

Obgleich Vicos Neue Wissenschaft (NW) vom Blickwinkel der praktischen Philosophie her interpretiert wurde, wurde seine Behandlung moralischer Tugenden weitgehend übersehen. Ich verweise auf die zentrale Rolle, die Tugenden in der NW spielen, wo die Geschichte der Menschheit als Geschichte darüber dargestellt wurde, wie Laster und Tugenden sich entfalten, und die Domäne des freien Willens auf die Möglichkeit der Bildung von Tugenden der Leidenschaften konzentriert ist. Dies bringt neues Licht in die Begriffe wie „Heterogonie der Zwecke“, Verbindung zwischen den „bestioni“ und der Menschheit sowie Drohung der „Barbarei der Reflexion“. Dies ermöglicht uns ebenso, sich auf fiktive, mythologische und historische Persönlichkeiten zu fokussieren, die als Beispiel für deren Tugenden/Laster dienen und den Einblick in die Art und Weise bieten, wie Tugenden Geschichtsstadien formen. Nach der Schilderung einiger Quellen Vicos trachte ich zu zeigen, Vico führe einen engen Dialog mit der aristotelischen Tradition und interpretiere die moralischen Tugenden als einen historischen Rahmen und ein hermeneutisches Werkzeug, das sich gut eignet für die Einschätzung moralischer Stadien der menschlichen geschichtlichen Evolution auf dem Weg zur und von der Zivilisation.

Schlüsselwörter

Giambattista Vico, *Neue Wissenschaft*, moralische Tugenden, Laster, Leidenschaften, aristotelische Tradition, Geschichte, Menschheit

Romana Bassi

La science nouvelle des vertus

Résumé

Bien que La science nouvelle (SN) de Vico ait été interprétée du point de vue de la philosophie pratique, l'étude des valeurs morales a été largement négligée. Dans ce travail, je mets en évidence le rôle clé des valeurs dans la SN, oeuvre dans laquelle l'histoire de l'humanité est présentée comme le récit de la formation des vices et des vertus et où le domaine de la volonté libre est centré sur la possibilité de créer des vertus à partir des passions. Cela met en lumière des concepts tels que « hétérogonie des fins », le rapport entre le « bestioni » et l'humanité et les dangers du « barbarisme de la réflexion ». Cela nous permet également de nous concentrer sur les figures fictives, mythologiques, et historiques qui représentent de manière exemplaire leurs vertus/vices et qui nous offrent un aperçu sur la manière dont les vertus forment les stades de l'histoire. Après avoir présenté une vue d'ensemble de certaines des sources de Vico, je soutiens qu'il engage un dialogue étroit avec la tradition aristotélicienne. Je tente également de montrer qu'il interprète les vertus morales comme cadre historique et arme herméneutique propices à évaluer les stades moraux de l'histoire de l'évolution de l'humanité sur le chemin de la civilisation, aussi bien que partant d'elle.

Mots-clés

Giambattista Vico, *La science nouvelle*, vertus morales, vices, passions, tradition aristotélicienne, histoire, humanité